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AUTHOR Rocheleau, Ann Marie
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ABSTRACT

The Lancaster Visiting Cottage Program, located at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Lancaster, was implemented to allow children to visit overnight with their incarcerated mothers. It was hoped that the program would reunite mothers with their children, help them to maintain or re-establish close ties, and prepare mothers for their eventual release. A process evaluation was conducted of the program's first year in operation. The evaluation found that, during the first year, there were 111 extended visits between 30 inmate mothers and 51 of their children. Most of the visits occurred on weekends and usually lasted two nights. The majority of visits involved a mother and a single child. The mothers participating in the program averaged an extended program visit every 42 days. Although the program was implemented smoothly as planned, the level of participation expected by program planners was higher than the actual level of participation achieved in the first year. This evaluation report highlights some of the staff and inmate theories regarding the low participation rate and presents a statistical analysis of frequent participants, infrequent participants, and nonparticipants. The evaluation also presents information on inmate mothers who participated in the program, citing significant differences in the backgrounds and needs of long-term versus short-term inmates. This information should be useful in future program and policy planning. (Author/NB)

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JOINING INCARCERATED MOTHERS WITH THEIR CHILDREN:

EVALUATION OF THE LANCASTER VISITING COTTAGE PROGRAM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Prepared by:

Ann Marie Rocheleau
Senior Research Analyst

CG 020190

Massachusetts Department of Correction
Michael V. Fair
Commissioner

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EVALUATION OF THE LANCASTER VISITING COTTAGE PROGRAM

ABSTRACT

The Massachusetts Department of Correction opened an innovative program in January, 1985, whereby children could visit overnight with their incarcerated mothers. The Lancaster Visiting Cottage Program, located at MCI-Lancaster, a minimum and pre-release co-correctional facility, offers a private and comfortable setting for the extended visits in the program's fully-equipped three-bedroom trailers. The program was implemented with hopes that it would serve to reunite mothers with their children, help them to maintain or re-establish close ties and prepare the mothers for their eventual release. The planning and advising of the program were completed through an interagency model - a cooperative effort among the Department of Correction, other state agencies and private, non-profit organizations.

This report is the result of a process evaluation of the program's first year in operation. The research had three objectives: to provide feedback to the Lancaster staff and Advisory Board throughout the first year, to monitor the usage and participation of the program during that first year and to present a description of how the program operates.

During 1985, there were 111 extended visits between 30 inmate mothers and 51 of their children. Most of the visits occurred on the weekends, usually lasting two nights. Although some of the visits involved two or more children, the majority of visits involved a single child. Controlling for the length of time spent at Lancaster, the female participants averaged an extended program visit every 42 days.

Perhaps the most important finding of the evaluation was that the program was implemented as planned. Despite the initial skepticism and resistance to such an innovative program, it was smoothly implemented through the hard work of the program staff and with the support of the Lancaster administration and the program's Advisory Board.

Unfortunately, the level of participation expected by the program planners was higher than the actual level of participation achieved in the program's first year. This report highlights some of the staff and inmate theories regarding the low participation rate, in addition to presenting a statistical analysis of frequent, infrequent and non-participants. It appears though that no one reason can fully explain the level of participation and perhaps, that the expected level of participation itself may have been unrealistically high.

The evaluation also yielded a wealth of information regarding the inmate mothers who were program participants. For example, significant differences were found in the backgrounds and needs of long-term vs. short-term inmate mothers. This information coupled with the knowledge about the effects of separation and the needs of inmate mothers, can be utilized in future program and policy planning.

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JOINING INCARCERATED MOTHERS WITH THEIR CHILDREN: EVALUATION OF THE LANCASTER VISITING COTTAGE PROGRAM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the number of females incarcerated has increased over the years, so has the amount of attention focused on the children of inmate mothers. Nationwide studies have found that between 65% and 73% of all female inmates are also mothers of minor children. Moreover, three-fourths of these inmate mothers were caring for their children just prior to being incarcerated. Researchers studying this population have uncovered a number of issues and problems that inmate mothers and their children must face upon a mother's incarceration. These include the difficulty of the separation itself, the need to find a suitable caretaker for the children, the explanation of the mother's absence and the issue of having children visit their mothers in prison.

The Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) operates or oversees a number of programs and services geared toward inmate mothers and their children. MCI-Framingham, the medium security facility in which all state and most county female commitments begin their incarceration, hosts an extensive variety of programs. The Family Services Coordinator oversees the Children's Visiting Area and the Parenting Center, as well as addresses the various needs of newly incarcerated mothers, inmates who are pregnant and families in general. Two private, non-profit organizations, Aid to Incarcerated Mothers (A.I.M.) and the Women's Health and Learning Center, provide valuable resources to inmate mothers such as transportation of the children for visits, counseling, health care, education and advocacy. The minimum and pre-release facilities which house women, including MCI-Lancaster, Hodder House, Brooke House and Charlotte

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House, all have extensive visiting hours and provide services geared toward inmate mothers.

In January, 1985, an innovative extended visiting program for inmate mothers was opened at MCI-Lancaster, a co-correctional minimum and pre-release facility. The Lancaster Visiting Cottage Program affords inmate mothers the opportunity to visit with their children overnight in the privacy and comfortable atmosphere of the program's trailers. It was hoped that the program would help inmate mothers to reunite with their children, to maintain or re-establish their relationship and to prepare mothers for their eventual release. The program is staffed by a Program Coordinator who screens the applicants, contacts the families and facilitates the visits and a Family Therapist who provides support and counseling to the inmate mothers and their children.

This report is the result of a process evaluation of the Visiting Cottage Program's (VCP) first year of existence. The objectives of the evaluation were threefold: to provide feedback to Lancaster and the Advisory Board throughout the evaluation period, to monitor the program's usage and participants in its first year and to provide the administration with a description of what the program looks like in operation. The researcher, with the aid of the Program Coordinator, kept track of the frequency and outcome of visits and conducted extensive interviews with inmate participants, Lancaster staff and the children's caretakers.

Although the study yielded an enormous amount of information about the program [redacted] participants, six major findings emerged which are discussed below. Perhaps the most important finding was that the program was implemented as planned without any serious problems or obstacles. The remaining five findings include: that there are benefits to an interagency model, that there was a lower than expected participation rate, that the separation due to incarceration affects the children and inmate mothers, that there are differences between short-term

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and long-term inmate mothers and finally, that the program had a major effect on the Lancaster staff.

That an extended visiting program was implemented is evidenced by the 111 extended visits experienced by 30 inmate mothers and their 51 children. Controlling for the length of time at Lancaster, the average program participant had a trailer visit every 42 days. Almost all of the Lancaster staff believed that the program had been implemented as planned. The program participants were very enthusiastic and supportive of the program. During the program's first year, no major crises occured and there were relatively few breeches of security. The one suspected breech of security was the possibility that a small number of participants entertained male inmate visitors during trailer visits at night. Although never substantiated, this breech was believed to have been short-lived. Outside of this problem, no other serious infractions or problems arose, nor were any of the initial fears of the program founded, such as escape, substance abuse, neglect, child abuse or the disruption of the facility by the participants' children.

There was a concensus among the Lancaster staff and the VCP participants regarding the three areas in which improvements could be made in the program's daily operation. The first area in which an improvement could be made is the location of the trailers. Due to problems with utility hook-ups, the trailers are located quite a distance from the women's cottage and necessitate a walk past the men's cottage to reach the trailers. This has obvious implications for the monitoring of the program visits, as well as presenting an inconvenience to program staff and the participants themselves. The second area of need is an extension of the activities available for children who are on an extended visit. This is especially evident for children aged ten or older. Suggestions for improvements included the use of volunteers to create and supervise activities, supervised group trips, the designation of play areas and the purchase of more games and toys. The

third area of need, transportation of the children to the facility, is one that still persists, despite multiple efforts to address it by the Program Coordinator and members of the Advisory Board.

One of the program objectives was to implement a true interagency model. Although staff from the Department of Correction took the lead, they were joined by representatives from the state Departments of Social Services, Public Health, and Mental health, the Office for Children, A.I.M. and the Women's Health and Learning Center in the planning of the program. The inclusion of all of these participants made for a rich, albeit controversial Planning and Advisory Board. It is this researcher's opinion that along with the hard work of the program staff and the support of the Lancaster administration, the interagency model was a major factor in the program's successful and smooth implementation. Not only did the Board carefully plan every facet of the program, but over time the agencies on the Board contributed valuable resources, services, support and manpower to the program.

Another finding of this research was that the rate of participation was lower than was expected by Lancaster staff and the Planning Board. During 1985, there was an average of 13.6 eligible participants per month, yet the number of actual extended visits only averaged 9.8 per month. Although this report highlights the Lancaster staff's and inmate mothers' theories on frequency of participation, as well as [illegible] a statistical analysis of frequent, infrequent and non-participants, no definite reasons were found for the lower than expected participation. Perhaps the expected rate of participation was unrealistic, as might have been the expectation that all eligible inmate mothers would be willing and able to participate. Given the complexity of the lives of these inmate mothers, as revealed during the program's first year, it is no wonder that the decision to participate does not begin and end with a mere willingness to spend time with one's

children. Instead, a myriad of factors is involved and the decision to participate must be agreed upon by the inmate mother, the children, the caretakers, and at times, the Department of Social Services. This is an area where continued monitoring and further research would be warranted.

The average VCP applicant during the program's first year was not much different than the average 1985 female commitment. She was most likely white, unmarried, unemployed and at the age of 27 at the time of her incarceration. The only major difference was the type of offense for which she was presently incarcerated. More of the VCP applicants had committed person offenses and thus, were serving more time than the average 1985 female commitment.

Prior to their incarceration, 74% of the VCP applicants had been caring for all of their children. Upon incarceration, the majority of children (64%) were being cared for by relatives, most often by grandparents. Another 25% were living in foster homes. Both the before and after caretaking situations of the children of the VCP inmate mothers proved to be very similar to what other researchers have found nationwide.

Despite the possible existence of a number of mitigating circumstances and problems, the fact is that incarceration does separate a great many children from their mothers. Interviews with the inmate mothers and caretakers unveiled the variety of effects that this separation had on the children. Some children developed [illegible]ical symptoms such as eating and sleeping disorders, increased sickness and problems with developmental skills. Others exhibited emotional reactions including sadness, depression, anger and frustration. Several children had problems adjusting to their caretakers or experienced problems in school, either acting out themselves or being the victim of peer teasing.

Mothers were also affected by the separation from their children at incarceration. Initially, most of the VCP mothers reacted emotionally, feeling

guilty, depressed, angry and frustrated. Some women became withdrawn, while others acted out ending up with severe disciplinary records. Some of the VCP mothers also had to worry about the choice of a caretaker, the quality of caretaking and the possibility that they might permanently lose custody of their children. Their greatest worry was that their relationship with their children would disintegrate. As it turns out, this latter worry was not unfounded, especially for the mothers serving longer sentences.

One of the major findings of this study was the clear delineation between the long-term and short-term inmate mothers who applied to participate in the Visiting Cottage Program. There were 24 short-term offenders who had been incarcerated for eight months or less and 14 long-term offenders who had been incarcerated for twenty months or more. The long-termers were more apt to be serving a lengthy sentence for a person offense. The short-termers, on the other hand, were more likely to be serving time for a drug offense or one that was drug-related, such as prostitution or check forgery. In addition, the short-termers were also more apt to have a history of serious substance abuse, as well as prior charges for drug offenses.

These differences have certain implications for both the family lives and the treatment needs of these two groups. By virtue of their long sentence, many of the VCP long-termers experienced a disintegration of their families. Children of long-termers were more likely to be in the custody of DSS, in the care of foster parents and living apart from their siblings. They were also more apt to have lost touch with their fathers, their mothers and their extended families. As one would expect, long-term inmate mothers were more apt to have infrequent or no extended program visits with their children compared to short-termers. The acknowledgement of a segment of women who, by virtue of their sentence structure, must be incarcerated in a medium security facility for a given number of

years, raises many policy and program questions. For example, one might question the utility of having extended visiting programs only in minimum security facilities since long-termers cannot make use of them until they have served several years during which the disintegration of the family would already be underway.

For the short-termers, any disintegration in the family would be more likely attributed to their substance abuse, rather than their incarceration. In fact, several of the VCP short-termers had been separated from at least one of their children prior to their incarceration. It would seem then that the visiting policy at Framingham and the extended visiting programs at Lancaster, Hodder House and Charlotte House afford the short-termers ample opportunity to spend time with their children during their short incarceration. However, the nurturance of the mother-child relationship is fruitless if once released, the mother returns to drug and alcohol abuse. Therefore, addressing the substance abuse needs of these women must be the number one priority.

Whether they are long- or short-termers, for many of the VCP participants, it was not enough to simply put them together with their children. Some have never acquired the necessary parental skills, while others have lost touch with the maternal role. For many women, the complexity of their former or current family lives colors their attitude and their understanding of their children's needs. It is clear that the Lancaster Visiting Cottage Program and this evaluation have raised more questions than given answers regarding the family lives and needs of inmate mothers.

The program also had an impact on the staff at Lancaster. During the planning stage, many of the staff were skeptical of the program and feared its effect on their duties and the daily institutional operations. Some of the staff viewed the program as giving privileges to those who did not deserve them. Others resented the overall notion of change. Once underway, program staff had to deal

with some initial resistance, which over time dissipated. However, all of the staff, especially the program staff and those female officers who worked during the time when visits occurred, were faced with a new aspect of the residents - inmates as mothers. It is this researcher's opinion that both the innovative nature of the program and the staff's exposure to some of the familial aspects of the participants' lives, necessitate a drawing in and an explanation of the program's components and goals to the correctional staff. Without the inclusion of these line staff, both program staff's and participants' actions may be misinterpreted, conclusions may be drawn in a void and the program risks being undermined.

In summary, much has been learned from both the process of planning and implementing the Lancaster Visiting Cottage Program and from this evaluation. Not only have we learned about the mechanics of this program and the problems and needs of inmate mothers, but clear lessons have been learned about program implementation, cooperation with outside agencies, the innate resistance to change and the need to periodically reassess program needs and resources. It is hoped that future planners working on programs for female inmates will draw on the expertise and experience of both the Lancaster staff and the individual members of the Planning Board.